

**Conservation and Development Committee Testimony
For Meeting of February 10, 2016**

Submitted By :

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The 5.75% cut to the budget of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection proposed in the Governor's Midterm Budget Adjustment's will be painful to a Department already woefully under-resourced in both its overall budget and its staffing. The specific impact of this cut to Connecticut's State Parks and Forests ("Parks"), which for decades have been viewed as "low-hanging fruit" when it comes to budget cuts, can be disastrous! Further cuts would severely impact the Parks since they are already **significantly understaffed** and only able to be maintained (often at desultory minimum levels) through the tremendous resourcefulness of a dedicated and talented management team and staff.

For decades (yes, decades!) the annual per capita spending on Connecticut's State Parks and Forests has been at or near the bottom (did we get as high as 49th one year"?) of the 50 states. What does this lack of funding result in? For starters there is:

- Within the DEEP State Parks Division of DEEP, permanent staffing is well below 1 person per park and forest;
- Aging, and frequently unsafe, equipment;
- Insufficient staffing to allow our parks to be safely enjoyed by Connecticut residents and visitors;
- Excessive entrance fees, which put the Parks out of reach of many potential visitors;
- An overworked and underpaid workforce.

Connecticut's state parks and forests are often referred to as Connecticut's Backyard as they are the primary outdoor resource available to many Connecticut residents. Maintenance of a good Parks system through availability of adequate resources is inexpensive relative to many budgeted programs. Cutting the DEEP budget will do further irreparable harm to the Parks system.

Dramatically reducing the budget, as proposed by the Governor, is bad news for a Department that is managing land for multiple benefits (recreation, habitat, water supply protection, etc.). There simply is no substitute for having enough professionals on-the-ground doing and planning for that ongoing land management, enhancing the visitor experience and ensuring that future land donors will not have second thoughts about giving or selling land to the Parks system because they believe the State will not maintain these resources.

I implore you not to further reduce the DEEP budget below its already desultory levels. Stop the ongoing damage to these cherished resources and the abuse of the Parks staff who are its stewards.

Thank you!